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Making Space for Our Stories! Imagining a Democratic Classroom

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Making Space for Our Stories!
Imagining a Democratic Classroom

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Voices

We are teacher-student (Penny) and student-teacher (Olivia) in a mutual relationship as colearners and cowriters who experienced together a graduate course called Education, Democracy, and Social Change. You will hear each of our voices as well as the 10 author/partners of the five generative themes and the embedded voices of all 17 students in the class through their K–12 remembered stories.

We would like to acknowledge all the story contributors, "we — be — the we — in 'We the People'" from Education, Democracy, and Social Change, fall 2009: Brooke Beresford, Tina Brown, Denis Cruz, Molly Ecker, Janice Gagnon, Talia Gangano, Alice Kennedy, Debbie Love-Gonzalez, Tiffany Martinez, Elizabeth Moreno, Sabrina Pagano, Michelle Pamplin, Chris Powell, Bre Resto, Wendy Rogan, Chris Vogt, and the creative expression/performance of herself as a democratic educator by Linda Barta from the summer class of 2009. (Barta performed "We the People???" at the end of this article.)

Introduction & Background

by Penny and Olivia

We are our stories. Each of us has a personal narrative careening around in the head, a library of personal drama, waiting to be expressed. Also, we are each connected to the larger stories of the various subcommunities to which we belong.

> Too often when I see student failure, I see students who have looked into the mirror of their school and their image is not reflected — in the curriculum, in the portraits that line the hallways, in the choir, in the theater productions or the honor society roster. (Christensen, 2009, p. 15)

We cannot leave these stories behind when we enter a classroom or schoolhouse. They are an important part of who we are. Abandoning these stories, omitting them from shared discourse in the classroom, keeps voices silenced, voices that could become valuable, inextricable components of public identity. When provided a safe space to take risks in the graduate education classroom, to unpack and share these diverse stories of our own critical K–12 experiences, we can help ourselves to understand differences and commit to constructing classrooms, schools, and communities as social learning environments that are more responsive, inclusive, caring, just, and joyous.

> Anyone who has lived has stories to tell, but in order for these stories to emerge, I must construct a classroom where students feel safe enough to be wild and risky in their work. My curriculum uses students' lives as critical texts we mine for stories. …I have discovered that students care more about learning when the content matters. (Christensen, 2009, p. 1)

There are the stories we tell and the stories we live. Our perceptions and memories hold onto multiple versions. When there are mixed messages between intent and content or word and deed, credibility and trust diminish (Argyris, 1991, Meier, 2005). When some stories are not as legitimized or valued as others, or as tradition shows, some narratives are normed around a supra-powerful other, an oppressive situation exists, one that excludes some stories and closes down rich possibilities for learning. This creates a dominant culture of power, as Lisa Delpit describes it (2006). Delpit believes that this work takes action, not just ideals, saying, "Black parents, teachers of color, and members of poor communities must be allowed to participate fully in the discussion of what kind of instruction is in their children's best interest. Good liberal intentions are not enough" (1988, para. 7). When there are not genuine opportunities to develop the levels of awareness, self-efficacy, and transformative change that include everyone's "otherness," the situation can become anti-learning, immoral, and dehumanizing. At a macro social level, it can be fatally destructive to a society that claims aspiration to democratic principles.

Through the "epistemology of the ear," mutual listening, and attempts to dialogue in a graduate course that asks, "What does it mean to be an educator in a democracy? What are the special responsibilities?" come the possibilities to more deeply know and understand ourselves, diverse others, and our work. Coconstructing this recursive process of introspection and connectedness within a caring community of educators provided us a fertile context in which to begin to explore how our own narratives could be the genesis for creating a portrait of a democratic classroom and school.

In such a group of colleagues/storytellers, the intention was to feel safe enough to take both personal and professional risks to in order to openly listen, learn, and grow. We worked from the beginning to build our own democratic community in the classroom. From an Individual Needs Assessment solicited on the first night, we developed our own set of Class Norms (Marshall & Oliva, p. 177-8), and among them was the rule that anything said in our classroom would not leave those walls. We were trying to experience what it means to bring the whole self to the classroom. Through the stories of our experiences, we situated ourselves quite personally and publicly in our work of exploring the interdependent course topics: education, democracy, and social change.

At the beginning of the semester, students responded to a quick-write prompt to write about an incident in their own K–12 experience that made a strong and lasting impact on them. It could be negative or positive, taking place inside or outside the classroom. The idea was to take these vivid lived experiences and use them to illustrate and make personal what we were reading and discussing in terms of creating more democratic classrooms and schools. At this time, each student took the risk to trust, and shared stories that ranged from memorable learning experiences to deeply personal revelations. This graduate class assignment resulted in a beautiful mess, a jumbled, colorful patchwork of the vastly diverse backgrounds of each student. The sharing of these narratives nurtured feelings of closeness, understanding, and mutual respect among those in the classroom.

About a third of the way through the course, it was becoming apparent during check-in that the students were feeling overwhelmed with the assignments and the pressures of their lives outside the classroom. We stopped our work to discuss their needs and the result was to offer more choices of long-term assignments. We kept coming back to our stories to illustrate and make sense of what we were reading and what was going on in the world outside the classroom.

As the instructor, I had been thinking about collaborating with students to do some writing. In a

moment that can only be described as "wild and risky," I offered all the students an opportunity to write a collaborative journal article. Ten students took up the challenge and chose this option. As a group, we read, came together, and coded our stories. We presented these codes/categories to the whole class for authenticity and feedback, and came up with five themes. Two student authors then took each theme and collaborated on a section of the article that included an explanation of the theme and connections to some of our stories that illustrated the theme; we then imagined what it might look like if applied to a democratic classroom. Olivia subsequently chose collaboration with me on the completion and editing of the article as her master's degree project.

The five themes are Teacher-Student Relationships; Home, School, and Community Connections; Socio-Cultural Diversity; Critical Pedagogy and Curriculum; and Resiliency.

Teacher-Student Relationships

By Tina Brown and Sabrina Pagano

A continuous thread running through the five themes that emerged from our individual K–12 experiences is the importance and nature of human relationships in social settings of classrooms and schools. Because schooling is both an intrapersonal and interpersonal experience, the quality and nature of the relationships affect learning in significant ways. Paulo Freire declared, "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (1970, p. 72). The relationship between the teacher and student is one that can foster learning through love and reliance. "Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers" (Freire, 1970, p. 80). However, in a nondemocratic classroom, teachers too easily can abuse their authority. It is then that the relationship between the student and teacher is broken. The student loses trust within the learning environment.

The stories of this lost trust are powerful, presenting teachers who perhaps acted unconsciously.

> It was the end of my eighth-grade year and I was struggling badly in school. …My parents were getting a divorce, and my oldest sister, whom I looked up to…was away from home working to help my mom pay the bills. Needless to say, it was not a good time in my life and school was not a priority. My mother and I went into a meeting with my teachers and the principal, who said if I did not pass all the final exams, I would not be promoted to the next grade. I remember the math teacher telling my mom that there was no way I was going to pass the math test. (Story 12)

The teacher did not seek to know the whole child and therefore acted without understanding or sympathy for the student's situation.

A second example of teacher-student relationship breakdown comes from a student remembering her seventh-grade year, when she had just moved to the United States from another country:

> I had just moved from Ireland to California and was extremely nervous and shy about being in this new environment. One of the first assignments in my history class was to choose a historical figure and present an oral presentation to the class. …I practiced and practiced at home and had the perfect six-minute speech. I can still clearly see the classroom when it was my turn. I walked to the front of the room and delivered my entire six-minute speech in three minutes, I don't think I took a single breath. I was mortified, and instead of being understanding, my teacher laughed at me in front of everyone and joked about my shyness. From that day, I never raise my hand or willingly participate in a class discussion, not even at the [graduate] university level. (Story 9)

Kohn discusses the debilitating nature of publicly humiliating a student: "The best predictor of whether

children will be able to accept themselves as fundamentally valuable and capable is the extent to which they have been accepted unconditionally by others" (2005, p. 20).

The last two examples concern inhumane treatment of students and how long-lasting such actions can be.

> I clearly remember that it was my first week of school. …Since I had just arrived from Mexico, I was not fluent in English and it was difficult for me to understand the language. …One day I wanted to go to the restroom during class and I really had to go, but she proceeded to tell me that I had to ask her in English in order to be allowed to go to the restroom. I did not understand her at all and it was difficult to say or ask her since I didn't know how to say it. I simply gave up and I ended up peeing in my pants because I was so embarrassed and upset at myself. (Story 16)

The student was treated cruelly for her inability to speak the dominant language of power. The second student felt unjustly punished:

> After morning recess, we were all still chattering and laughing when we returned to class. My teacher was angry because we would not settle down, be quiet, and begin our pre-lunch lessons. She told us that if she heard another word, she would come down each row and paddle each one of us. …Hardly any of us could scarcely believe this threat, so several kept talking. Unfortunately, my teacher delivered on her promise! That was the first and only time I ever received corporal punishment in a school, and I always felt that it was extremely unjust. (Story 15)

Though this student was not at fault for the actions of her peers, everyone was punished and with physical force. There were no values or principles of Restorative Justice that

> use inclusive, collaborative approaches for being in community. These approaches validate the experiences and needs of everyone within the community, particularly those who have been marginalized, oppressed, or harmed. These approaches allow us to act and respond in ways that are healing rather than alienating and coercive. (Amstutz, L. S. & Mullet, J. H., 2005, p. 15)

"Where did we ever get the crazy idea that in order for people to do better, we first have to make them feel worse?" (Nelsen, Lott & Glenn, cited in Amstutz, L. S. & Mullet, J. H., 2005, p. 11).

In both cases the students are penalized for actions outside of their control. Dewey believes that these negative displays of control actually hamper learning, saying, "In the merely blind response, direction is also blind. There may be training, but there is no education" (1916, p. 13). Long-term discipline aims to help children take responsibility for their own behavior. When children's lives or behaviors are too regulated by others, they feel no need to control themselves, since others do it for them. (Amstutz, L. S. & Mullet, J. H., 2005, p. 9). Students and teachers are in constant human and therefore political interaction, and within these interactions, relationships are formed.

> The year was coming to a close, and as eighth graders, we were to take the geometry placement test to see if we could [achieve advanced placement in math as high school freshmen]. Weeks before the test, I was clearly nervous and getting anxious about my performance. I asked my teacher if I had a chance and she pushed me to work hard and study. …She said that she knew I would do well in geometry if I worked hard and passed the test. I studied my hardest and passed the test. To this day, I am thankful to her for pushing me so hard. (Story 10)

This is just one example of the power of a positive teacher/student relationship. Paulo Freire discusses this connection, saying, "An important moment in the learning situation is when the student critically evaluates what she knows" instead of simply memorizing material (Freire, 1998, p. 9). This student studied for the math placement test not

only to pass, but she also had the determination to show her teacher, as well as herself, that she could overcome this great obstacle. Within a democratic environment, it is necessary to assist others, as equal opportunity for success is essential to a democratic community. Satisfaction is reciprocal in a positive teacher/student relationship. The teacher sincerely cared about this student, and when that care exists, success is shared by both parties.

The next memory comes from a woman reminiscing about her high school experience with her English teacher:

> At this time, I had a literature teacher, Mrs. Armstrong,…who had extremely high expectations for us. The students would always talk about how she was a "slave-driver." It seemed like every day she called on me during class. I certainly felt like she picked on me. [At the end of the year] we had our awards assembly. When it came time for the literature award, my name was called from the podium. My friends were surprised, but I was the most surprised of all. Thank you, Mrs. Armstrong! (Story 17).

Although the student did not understand the teacher's methods at first, she came to realize that the teacher wanted to maximize her students' capabilities. This teacher was aware of the necessity for strictness within her classroom, and she knew the difference between using her authority and being an authoritarian. When considering the role of authority within an education relationship, Freire remarks, "It is my good sense that will tell me that exercising my authority in the classroom through the decisions I make, the activities I direct, the tasks I assign, and the goals I set for both individuals and the group is not a sign of authoritarianism" (1998, p. 60). Both the English teacher and Freire are aware of the need to challenge without harsh control.

Through certain school programs, teachers can foster the same feeling of confidence in students. The AVID program was created to help students with average performance prepare for college.

> In eighth grade, I received an invitation to attend a meeting with the AVID directors for my future high school. …I had never thought about higher education before then, but after four years of that program, I ended up getting into the university of my choice, and I tutored with the AVID program my senior year of high school and throughout college. I think my passion for teaching came from AVID and am so thankful that I was given the opportunity to succeed in this program. (Story 11)

Because of the encouragement from her teachers in the AVID program, this student not only succeeded, but was also inspired to pass on the confidence she gained. As we have seen, positive and supportive teacher-student relationships can give a student a strong sense of belief in his or her potential that can last a lifetime.

We Have the Audacity to Hope…

Within school walls, it can become difficult to effectively create a caring relationship that promotes a democratic environment; however, there are many ways to do so. One aspect of this system of education Freire stresses is the importance of humanization, and he acknowledges feelings within these relationships. He states,

> In truth, I feel it is necessary to overcome the false separation between serious teaching and the expression of feeling. It is not a foregone conclusion, especially from a democratic standpoint, that the more serious, cold, distant, and gray I am in my relations with my students in the course of teaching them, the better a teacher I will be. (Freire, 1998, p. 125)

It is the people involved who bring humanization and productiveness to a democratic education. Authoritarianism in the classroom has no place in a society striving to work together towards becoming truly democratic.

It would be difficult to locate a teacher who has never learned anything new from his or her students. To treat

them as if they are invisible and voiceless in an educational hierarchy undermines their capacity to become engaged citizens or to develop a democratic public identity. In a democratic school, all members involved should be treated as reciprocal constructors of knowledge, and all voices should be heard and considered before important decisions are made. We need open, reciprocal, and respectful relationships between teachers and students.

Home, School, and Community Connections

By Wendy Rogan and Olivia Hayes

"What shall we teach them? How can we guide them? What hope can we offer them?" Greene, 1978, p. 201). How can we help them to use sound judgment and make wise and courageous decisions? How can we nurture empowered, engaged, and informed citizens?" (Teachers have pondered these questions historically. Parents ask themselves the same questions when their children are young. Perhaps teachers, parents, and members of local communities should work together to find the answers. A strong partnership among schools, families, and communities has always been a foundation of democratic education. As progressive educators from John Dewey (1916) to Deborah Meier (2003) have pointed out, the parent is the child's first teacher, and the home environment the child's first classroom. Democratic educators understand that children do not conveniently leave their home, school, and communal lives behind when they enter the classroom. Rather, the home, school, and community form a continuum, or web, of learning for the child.

Following decades of research showing positive effects of parenting on student achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), parent involvement is now defined and mandated by NCLB. Yet, in most schools, the notion of "parents [and guardians] as full partners" in their children's education is an ideal yet to be realized. Though schools may write the requisite involvement policies and set up the required parent meetings, these documents and structures are dominated by norms of the privileged personnel in schools unless all families are truly valued as members of the school community. Democratic educators aim to create more authentic home, school, and community connections by building genuine reciprocal relationships with families and by providing opportunities for families to construct knowledge and engage with schools in meaningful ways.

Relationships are at the center of democratic school models. However, we cannot assume that past strategies used to establish these ties will continue to be effective in reaching today's families. As Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, and Davies (2007) indicate, families and communities are facing increased economic pressures and social problems, which present new challenges for schools (2007). For example, as manufacturing jobs decline and poverty rates increase, the number of highly mobile families has risen. Out of 290 million people in the United States, 43 million move each year (Henderson et al., 2007). The shortage of affordable housing means more families are living without permanent shelter. Homelessness affects children's physical and mental health, and their work in school. Changing family structures also impact the way schools interact with families. According to the 2000 census, over four million children are being raised by grandparents, and one-fourth of those grandparents have sole custody of those children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Whereas parent involvement from the dominant middle-class white suburban culture once meant enlisting the help of moms to organize fundraisers and chaperone field trips, now schools must reach out to many configurations of families and other caregivers in ways that meet their needs and honor their strengths. For example, schools can organize events, such as cultural dialogue circles, for working parents when and where they can meet. Even though family structures vary vastly from home to home, the support of family and community outside of school can boost a student's esteem and confidence.

> One of the significant moments in my K–12 education was a gift I received in second grade for attaining straight A's. At the time, I was

> living in a foster home (my father was in alcohol rehab and my mother was in an asylum). …It was a simple Christmas bell pin that I wore on my blouse for second-grade pictures. When I look at that picture now, 46 years later, I still get goosebumps remembering how special I felt for my achievement. But, more than anything, I felt special because I was shown love. It motivated me for a long time! (Story 3)

This shows that both small and large gestures of family love and support from a caregiver or the community can foster a sense of confidence and security in students.

Apple and Beane describe democratic schools as "…marked by widespread participation in issues of governance and policy making. Committees, councils, and other school-wide decision-making groups *include not only professional educators, but also young people, their parents, and other members of the school community* [emphasis added]" (1995, p. 9). But while democratic schools emphasize the types of involvement that occur on the school campus, they can do more to encourage and recognize what families do at home to support education. The family effort to support learning at home is more influential that what was once thought (Henderson et al., 2007). In order to strengthen student support systems, schools need to build relationships with both families and surrounding communities. Though many adults are not able to participate in traditional forms of family involvement, such as volunteering in the classroom or attending school meetings, they have the desire and the capacity to support their children's education in other ways. Adults who have regular discussions with their children about school, talk about the importance of education, and set goals for learning give their children a tremendous advantage.

With students spending the majority of their time outside of school, home support is critical for their success within school walls.

> I loved math, but I was not the fastest mathematician. It has always taken more time for me to complete math assignments. We took timed tests in first grade to prove how fast we could recite our addition and subtraction tables. We were told we only knew [the math facts] if we could do them quickly. I was very upset the first time I tried. …At night I sat at the kitchen table as my mom cooked dinner and she recited the problems to me, helping me finish the test quickly. From then on, I did this with her every night and passed all the tests. (Story 2)

According to Reginald Clark, students who spend at least 20 hours a week engaged in meaningful learning activities with responsible, caring adults tend to have higher grades and test scores (2002). Home support can even have a mitigating effect when a child has had a negative school experience. Consider the student's experience in Story 12 (p. 6) — by the time this meeting had occurred, the school had failed the child in several ways. The teacher was insensitive to turmoil in the child's life. The school did not offer a plan to assist the student in catching up or suggest any additional support or resources that could help her. The student gained the skills she needed solely through her mother's intervention. But perhaps more importantly, the student developed the confidence necessary to overcome the teacher's prediction that she would fail and the motivation needed to continue working hard.

Indeed, home support and encouragement can help students achieve far beyond their expectations. However, a negative home experience can also strongly affect a student's scholastic performance. For instance, the student in Story 12 remembers her eighth-grade year as a struggle, because of the upheaval in her home. As this story shows, a strong home foundation is a safe haven for many children, but when the home is a place of conflict and strife, the stress can overflow into other areas of a child's life, especially school. Many in the field of education are now trying to "add on" the teaching of morals and values in the classroom through canned programs, but Rick Weissbourd believes that "the moral development of students does not depend primarily on explicit character education efforts but on the maturity

and ethical capacities of the adults with whom they interact — especially parents" (2003, p. 6).

Moral education in school is practically hopeless when we set up the development of character as a supreme end, and at the same time treat the acquiring of knowledge and the development of understanding, which of necessity occupy the chief part of school time, as having nothing to do with character. On such a basis, moral education is inevitably reduced to some kind of catechectical instruction, or lessons about morals. "…In fact direct instruction in morals has been effective only in social groups where it was a part of the authoritative control of the many by the few" (Dewey, 1916, p. 354).

For a child to have the social skills needed to succeed in life, homes, schools, and communities must all be places where values and beliefs are also instilled. Weissbourd says, "Adults do not simply transmit moral qualities and beliefs to children. These qualities and beliefs emerge and continually evolve in the wide array of relationships that every child has with both adults and peers starting nearly at birth" (2003, p. 7). If parents neglect to teach these values, not only will the child most likely fail, but the results can be destructive. Weissbourd describes a 10-year-old female student with ADD who lashes out at her teachers and peers, and he points to the fact that she has an "anxious mother and a father prone to spikes of anger" (2003, p. 8). With examples like this at home, it is no wonder that a student might act in the same manner.

We Have the Audacity to Hope…

A truly democratic school recognizes that all members of the school community have a voice in how and what students are learning, and parents are some of the key players. Joyce L. Epstein lists six types of involvement for school, family, and community partnerships, including reciprocal communication, volunteering opportunities, and family and community participation in decision-making (2002). This allows each constituency involved to bring its assets to the table. (Lindsey et al., 2010)

La Escuela Fratney in Milwaukee, Wis., is a very good example of a democratic school that fosters strong parent-teacher-community relationships. At one time a doomed institution, La Escuela Fratney became a completely different place when teachers and parents organized the Neighbors for a New Fratney (NNF), fighting battles with a decidedly non-democratic central office (Apple & Beane, 1995). These efforts paid off, and now the parents and teachers at Fratney are proud of what they have accomplished together. The book *Beyond the Bake Sale* offers examples of these partnerships, like open and accessible family centers with informative reading materials, scoring guides for student work, texts about different family cultures, and parents and teachers conducting research together (Henderson et al., 2007).

For all students, the classroom should be a place where home and community life can be discussed openly. Joel Spring believes that teachers should encourage students to think about their current situations by providing reading materials that present real-life limitations (2000). In order for students to understand who they are as individuals, they should be provided all the information needed to develop as persons —— a democracy is a place where every member has equal access to the full range of information. Along with developing self-knowledge, teachers should ensure that students recognize when they are safe and supported at home, and if they are not, that students feel confident to change the situation. Maxine Greene says, "When we look at the everyday reality of home and school, ...we can scarcely imagine ourselves taking moral positions. [There is a] tendency to perceive our everyday reality as a given —— objectively defined, impervious to change" (1978, p. 39). Effective teachers, parents, guardians, and communities are those who give children the support and tools they need to empower themselves. To this end, a democracy guarantees certain rights to everyone. Joel Spring says that, in order for children to take advantage of their universal right to education, they must "receive adequate food, medical care, housing, and protection" (2000, p. 134). The home and the surrounding community have a profound impact on children's lives, especially at school. It takes the conscious effort of all involved in the home, school, and community lives of children to make this impact positive.

Socio-Cultural Diversity

By Chris Vogt and Elizabeth Moreno

In a nation of immigrants, historically known as a "melting pot" and later a "salad bowl," educators must be aware of, sensitive to, and inclusive of students' various backgrounds. The notion that one size fits all or that there is even one universal version of truth is faulty and impractical in the diverse classrooms of today's schools. When planning a more democratic classroom, the teacher must be equipped with an understanding of the principles, processes, and procedures of democratic structures.

Equity, as a guiding principle in a classroom and school environment, can dramatically help students from backgrounds different from the "norm" have positive experiences. As is evident in our K–12 stories, inequity has the opposite effect. Socio-cultural diversity must be a permeating factor in classroom and school social spirit. Teachers need to understand that compassion and equity are part of the universal human right to a quality education (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, p. 2). Ignoring or marginalizing students can rob them of their self worth and desire for engagement in formal learning.

One key to creating a democratic classroom is to ensure that there are opportunities in which students can actively develop an informed, compassionate voice. Each member has a valuable contribution. It is important that the environment is welcoming enough to allow students to share their opinions and ideas with the group. Deborah Meier argues, "We have lost sight of the traditional public functions of schools: to pass on the skills, aptitudes, and habits needed for a democratic life" (2003, p. 16). This idea starts at the top of the school bureaucracy with the administration and filters down to every aspect of the school. In order to make this plausible, the teacher must create a community of learners who live in practice with democratic processes.

Robert Dahl sets forth five necessary conditions for a democracy to flourish. The first important factor is effective participation — the equal ability for a person to place questions before a group and express their opinions without fear of retribution by those who oppose their beliefs (Dahl, 1998). In order to participate in the process, the students must feel empowered to participate. This power of participation is not only present in classrooms, but also throughout schools. It is everyone's duty as a citizen of the school community, from the principal to the custodian, to create a moral and just environment.

When dignity and self-worth are stolen from one student, the entire community experiences a loss.

> Growing up in a Midwestern middle-class neighborhood in Nebraska, I stood out like a sore thumb. My Irish mother had red hair and hazel eyes. My two sisters and two brothers favored my mom's light complexion. …My father came to the U.S. from the Philippines and landed in Iowa and married my mother. I had very dark brown skin like my father, and arrived at school with high hopes and dreams.
>
> One day at recess an older boy came up to me on the playground and called me the "N" word. I didn't know the boy, and I was devastated. That night I tried to wash my skin white because I knew my dark skin was not a good thing to own. That incident was a defining moment in my life. I did not tell anyone at the time, and I have not shared it with anyone until now. (Story 4)

This wrenching incident demonstrates the destructive notion of "otherness" from a child's perspective. He realized that he looked different from his mother and his siblings, but until this critical point in his life, this difference was not something to be ashamed of; he just looked like his dad. A single-word epithet made him question his identity. His embarrassment from feeling like a second-class citizen robbed him of the high sense of self that he originally brought with him to school. Even though this incident did not occur in the classroom, it is important to understand that educators are not only responsible for classroom learning, but also the social spirit that exists as part of the school climate. So many times,

we as educators have been told that we are role models; it is time we begin to embrace this idea and act each day to welcome all people into our school environment.

According to Paulo Freire, "The education of the teacher should be so ethically grounded that any gap between professional and personal relationship is deplored" (1998, p. 24), and he promotes that the pedagogy of the teacher should reflect a high moral standard that is taught in the professional training programs. He also states, "One of the biggest difficulties about this ethical grounding is that we have to do everything in our power to sustain a universal human ethic without at the same falling into a hypocritical moralism" (Freire, 1998, p. 25). The understanding of this morality can manifest itself in the classroom through the experience of immigrant students. For example, in Story 9 (page 64), the teacher's lack of understanding the student and the student's discomfort in the new environment illustrated a dehumanizing classroom event; her fears of public speaking were not addressed with dignity. In subsequent dialogue, the student explained to the class that the teacher chose to publicly laugh at her even after she had expressed her fears to this adult authority. This lack of humanity came from not accommodating the emotional needs of a shy, new student. In Story 16 (page 64), not knowing English, the dominant language, resulted in the young girl being humiliated by her teacher.

The events above are examples of how our schools have failed some children because they were not part of the dominant culture. Though not all incidents happened in the classroom, teachers played a key role as adults in the school community in building the norms of the culture. Sometimes we can learn as much from failure as we can from success. The negative experiences that our colleagues had in grade school have significantly shaped their adult identities. They remembered them vividly and viscerally as if they had happened a few days ago. It does not have to be this way.

We Have the Audacity to Hope…

It is important that, in this age of scripted curriculum pacing guides and high-stakes standardized testing, we take the time to live with our students what it means to be moral citizens, to think critically and act as an ally when witnessing someone denigrating a fellow human being. Stephen Wolk believes that in order for change to occur, there must be a modification of the curriculum. "Our textbook-driven curricula have become educational perpetual motion machines of intellectual, moral, and creative mediocrity" (Wolk, 2007, p. 649). Though our focus on meeting the demands of the externally mandated NCLB policy has limited our local energy to focus on topics like diversity and social justice, we should work to be creative enough to imbed these ideals in the ethos of the school culture. In doing so, we will provide students with opportunities to understand injustices perpetrated by the status quo, to disrupt them, and to work for more inclusive and meaningful changes in structures and practices. These dehumanizing memories should serve us as educators to better understand the impact that one word or even an unintentional action can have on each child. By providing all our students the security and assurance that they can bring their whole selves to school, we can ensure that each community member will feel a sense of parity and value that will manifest itself in the act of humanizing the whole community.

Critical Pedagogy and Curriculum

by Brooke Beresford and Janice Gagnon

Implementing new ideas in pedagogy and curriculum gives educators a deep and abiding opportunity to provide a foundation for our learning communities that will help our children become responsible citizens of the 21st century, not only with technical know-how, but also with a profound awareness of social responsibility to themselves, their communities, and the world at large. Education must consider the whole child; Elliot Eisner states, "Children respond to educational situations not only intellectually but emotionally and socially" (2005, p. 16). So we must ask the question: What does a democratic classroom look like? What kinds of principles and practices develop empowered members of a learning community?

What kinds of experiences will help students become active citizens who work for a just and ethical society on the global stage? What everyday skills do students need most to help prepare them for life in the real world?

In terms of curriculum and pedagogy, a democratic classroom creates opportunities to empower students. Empowerment cannot be found in passive learning, nor can it be found in rote memorization or content absorption. John Dewey's vision, as relevant in 1916 as it is today, saw education as a social process. His recurrent and interdependent themes of education, democracy, and communication are effectively summed up in the following excerpt: "What nutrition and reproduction are to physiological life, education is to social life. This education consists primarily in transmission through communication. Communication is a process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession" (Dewey, 1916, p. 11).

Schools should be learning communities where all voices are present, heard, and honored; a place where dominant modes of thought are challenged to enhance and fine tune critical-thinking skills (Peterson, 2009). The classroom must reflect the democratic values of the community and be a place where multiple points of view are fairly represented. When students are challenged to think, the curriculum comes to life.

> In ninth grade, my combined history class had two teachers who decided to "act out" an event to communicate a certain concept. …It was 1969, and this type of teaching situation was quite rare. I still remember it, almost 40 years later, and the impact it had on my ninth-grade mind. Every student was asked what they thought, and everyone in class was able to participate in and witness live the differences in perception. Amazing day. (Story 13)

Dewey felt that schools, as part of a democratic society, ought to have numerous and varied points of interests as well as interaction and shared common cooperative intercourse with other groups (1916). This is one of Dewey's two main criteria for a democratic community or society.

Authentic learning, also known as experiential learning, allows students to explore and discuss concepts and relationships that are relevant to the real world and meaningful to the students. Authentic instruction differs from traditional methods by using and applying genuine tasks, scaffolding, inquiry and social discourse, and resources from the community.

> As a child I moved around a great deal with a father in the armed services. I attended six different schools in my K–12 experience. I think that the best lesson I ever learned was how to balance a budget and write a check in the sixth grade. If more classes taught these and other practical lessons about how credit cards, debt, and finances work, I think that our country would not be in the crisis that it is in today. (Story 6)

The power of these lessons lies in kinesthetic teaching that has real-life application. These finance lessons in the classroom provide a link between mathematical principle and practical application. Dewey, who also grew up with a military father embroiled in the Civil War, believed strongly in teaching practical skills to children as well as intellectual material. "Instead of trying to split schools into two kinds, one of a trade type for children whom it is assumed are to be employees and one of a liberal type for the children of the well-to-do, it will aim at such a reorganization of existing schools as will give all pupils a genuine respect for useful work" (Dewey, cited in Warde, 1960, para. 33). Authentic learning can be used with students of all ages and abilities. The teacher can scaffold, empowering students to identify a problem or situation they need to address and develop creative activities through which students can make peaceful social change. One student remembers a creative activity that helped her connect to a book read in class:

> My teacher read the book *Stone Soup* and made stone soup for us. I think this really stuck out for me because the actual soup made in class provided a tangible experience for us, which helped us make

> a personal connection to the story. In addition, it was something we did not encounter every day in class. …My kindergarten teacher made an everlasting impression on me. I did a similar activity with my kindergarten students while student teaching. (Story 1)

A democratic curriculum creates opportunities for empowerment, an environment that is "student-centered, experience-based, and language-rich" (Peterson, 2009, p. 69). In student-centered learning, students are active participants in their learning; they learn at their own pace and use their own strategies; they are more intrinsically than extrinsically motivated; learning is more individualized than standardized. Student-centered learning develops "how-to-learn" skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, and reflective thinking. Student-centered learning accounts for and adapts to multiple intelligences and different learning styles of students (Gardner, 1983; National Center for Research on Teacher Learning, 1999). Another student remembers an 11th-grade U.S. history class:

> Throughout my schooling, the teacher would just lecture and there was not much participation beyond reading aloud. In [my 11th-grade Honors U.S. History class], we were assigned roles for a reenactment of the court case Marbury v. Madison. This was the first of 10 court cases we reenacted that year. Because we were given the chance to "become" the historical characters, I felt for the first time that the material was alive. This project helped my imagination about school and history really take off. (Story 14)

When curriculum is experience based, the student is able to make real-life connections.

When we consider democratic values in the classroom, they must coexist with a strong belief in students' abilities to construct their own knowledge. As Apple and Beane state, "A democratic curriculum invites young people to shed the passive role of knowledge consumers and assume the active role of 'meaning maker.' It recognizes that people acquire knowledge by both studying external sources and engaging in complex activities that require them to construct their own knowledge" (1995, p. 9). Students must be allowed to construct their own knowledge, or they can become frustrated, as seen in this story:

> I was often flustered by the boredom of worksheets and "busy work." I often stayed home rather than attend school. I remember almost failing sixth-grade reading because I never did the homework when it was worksheet-related. I remember feeling stupid in social studies because I did not know *how* to read the textbook in a way that elicited information, and I certainly could not write down the information *not* learned on the worksheet for homework. Yet I always excelled at projects that asked me to make something that was my own. (Story 7)

This student knew that the regurgitation and recitation of facts and figures did not equal authentic, meaningful learning or empowerment.

We Have the Audacity to Hope…

Paulo Freire states the importance of "autonomy of the learner, whether the learner be child, youth, or adult as respect for the autonomy and dignity of every person is an ethical imperative and not a favor that we may or may not concede to each other" (1998, p. 59). In addition, empowerment goes both ways, benefiting not just the student, but the teacher as well. When Paulo Freire implemented his changes as superintendent of Sao Paulo, part of his curriculum reform provided teachers more autonomy than they had previously experienced in their roles as educators. At the same time, this changed and required of them much broader and more intense participation, i.e., being actively involved in the curriculum development (Freire, 1994). This paradigm change in the teacher's role resulted in empowerment for transformation.

A democratic classroom is an environment where children question, investigate, and analyze their classroom and the world around them. The curriculum is inquiry based; thus, children learn to ask questions and seek

knowledge to understand multiple perspectives. Dewey, as evidenced here, believes that students should be given a sense of shared purpose and direction in democratic classrooms: "In social situations the young have to refer their way of acting to what others are doing and make it fit in. This directs their action to a common result, and gives an understanding common to the participants" (1916, p. 47). In an inquiry-based classroom, all students should be able to "branch out" and still "fit in" with their classmates by sharing the same eager curiosity and willingness to learn. In addition, curriculum should reflect meaningful learning experience through hands-on experiential activities — specifically, self-governance, a class bill of rights, restorative discipline, class meetings, social action projects, community investigation, and materials not limited to textbooks. This should also include primary resources such as field trips, fine and performing arts, technology, journals, and newspapers.

As David Ackerman states, "each child owns her own sense of truth and desire for meaning" (2003, p. 348). When we create classrooms that honor all contributions, learning communities that treat the child as a whole, we enable our students to access the process of empowerment and the ability to construct their own knowledge. Garrison states that:

> Education is fundamentally a process of empowerment. Empowerment grows as we experience and learn from the effects of our choices and action. This process of education as empowerment means that a society — or a classroom — becomes more educative as it becomes more democratic and more democratic as it becomes more educative. (2003, p. 528)

Resiliency

by Talia Gangano and Chris Powell

"I am first a being of hope who, for any number of reason, may thereafter lose hope" (Freire, 1998, p. 70). Perhaps Freire knew that, in order to succeed, a person needs resiliency. We have all faced obstacles in our own K–12 experiences, and have found ways to be resilient, to persevere with the desire to improve education.

In our class, we found two groups or patterns of resiliency: those who sought help from others and those found strength within themselves.

> When I was in sixth grade, I decided that I was just as smart as the other kids in my school's gifted program, so I told my mother I wanted to be tested. She thought that all students in my school were tested earlier in the third grade and that I must not have passed. Not wanting me to be disappointed, she discouraged me. However, I persisted and went to the school office to request the permission form. I was nervous while waiting for the results of the test, so much that the school psychologist gave me a paperclip to bend, but I was elated when I found out I passed. (Story 5)

This student was determined to try for success, even though she was nervous about her chances. The courage to risk rejection instead of settling for the status quo is part of the human experience, according to Freire, who says, "We are convinced that our vocation for greatness and no mediocrity is an essential expression of the process of humanization in which we are inserted" (1998, p. 74).

> When I was in sixth grade, my teacher let me know that I was the fourth child of my family in her class. Due to this, she already had preconceived ideas of the type of student I would be. My older siblings struggled in reading and she assumed I would be the same. I was put into a low reading group and it was far too easy for me, but I didn't say anything until the teacher realized I was an excellent reader. From that moment on, I became a "superstar" in her class, helping read to the class and assisting ELL students with reading. (Story 8)

"Preconceptions…offend the essence of human dignity and constitute a radical negation of democracy" (Freire, 1998, p. 41). In the face of a negative presumption, this

student showed her teacher that she could break a long-standing (family) stereotype.

In Story 16 (p. 64), a young girl is humiliated in front of her class. However, in retrospect, the student later expressed in class that she used the experience as a reminder that she would never allow another student to be the subject of such treatment. Freire speaks about negative experiences as catalysts for good: "I register events not so as to adapt myself to them but so as to change them" (1998, p. 73). In Story 12 (p. 63), the student felt that her teacher did not believe in her. Instead of conforming to these thoughts, she decided to *change* the way her teacher viewed her. Freire believes we are able to determine a form of hope for ourselves. In other words, "we become capable of intervention" (Freire, 1998, p. 73). Because of their resiliency and personal growth, these two students, who later became educators, say that they are still using their negative school experiences for transformative change in their own practices.

We Have the Audacity to Hope…

Unfortunately, the negative narratives are not isolated events. Educators across the United States abuse their privileged positions every day. It would be easy to lose hope and accept the status quo. Instead, we choose to find the courage to work toward democratic change and to sustain the audacity, despite the overwhelming challenges, to hope. There is a real need (an ethical imperative) to disrupt and challenge the simple acts of privilege, and one of the ways to begin this process is by listening to and acknowledging those for whom such acts are not simple (Scapp, cited in hooks, 2003, p. 105).

As current teachers and administrators, we have the ability and duty to act responsibly to change the conditions of schooling. The graduate students in our class never let hope die. Through the space made in this class, we are now able to name, critically analyze, and reframe for ourselves the situations we experienced and determine humane ways to make sure that such situations do not happen to other children. We still need to hear about how inclusion of diversity changes the nature of intimacy, of how we see the world (hooks, 2003, p. 105). We are willing to risk disrupting the status quo to make sure that all students not only learn academically, but also as whole individuals who become the subjects of their own learning.

> One of the fundamental tasks of the educator who is open-minded is to be attentive and sensitive to the way a given social group reads and rereads its reality, so as to be able to stimulate progressively a generalized comprehension of this new reality (Freire, 1998, p. 78).

As educators, we need to remember to teach and care for each child unconditionally (Kohn, 2005). This way, even if a student does not perform well in school, knowing that they are part of a community that recognizes their importance and contribution helps them to become resilient. How can anyone overcome adversity if no one in their lives affirms their human dignity? How can people learn self-respect if no one in their lives shows them respect? Although some students encounter negative experiences, some find ways to move through the adversity with inner strength. "Kids require unconditional acceptance to flourish. And although it's most critical that they experience that kind of acceptance at home, what happens at school matters, too" (Kohn, 2005, p. 21). If students are treated humanely at home, at school, and in their communities, they will have the necessary space within which to build the capacity for both a private and public identity for themselves and a democratic society.

> Public schools will be preserved as a cornerstone of U.S. democracy, if citizens assess, question, and adjust our deeply held beliefs about the purpose of schooling and work to build resilient learning communities that we come to know well. Ownership creates responsibility, commitment, and hopefulness (Krovetz, 1999, p. 47).

We Have the Audacity to Hope…

by Olivia and Penny

Olivia: As a student in the class and a contributor to this article, I found the process liberating, enlightening, and heartwarming. I was honored to be a part of such an honest,

forthcoming group of students, and I learned so much about my friends. Some of these storytellers were students with whom I had shared other classes and become very familiar, yet I had a deeper understanding of them at the time of this project's completion. The most valuable part of the experience to me was the closeness and cohesion I felt with my class as we worked, and the feeling that even though our backgrounds were as varied as the patches on a quilt, we all shared that resiliency and hope, which gives us power as educators. We are advocating that making space to include personal stories into the curriculum has power that can be harnessed to create similar projects for students, faculty, and staff members to develop the same sense of equity, understanding, and respect. After all, this exercise is one meant to be mutually beneficial. Willis Hawley states, "The greater success we have in learning how to learn from and with people who bring different perspectives to a situation, the more powerful will be our abilities to understand and to reason" (2004, p. 41). A democratic school system would not only benefit public schools, but also higher education. We feel that our project exemplifies the type of collaborative work currently being done in Chapman University's College of Educational Studies, and we plan to share this example with others departments on campus. Although higher education has always been ideally synonymous with free thought, the atmosphere at many institutions can often discourage collaborative work, especially when tenure and promotion committees reward professors more for individual research than joint studies. In the years to come, we hope that universities will recognize the value of working and learning through collaboration and mutual respect across differences, and that this social spirit will carry forward into research studies and higher ed classrooms as well as spread to public education at all levels.

Penny: As the course instructor, our mutual listening and writing processes nurtured my soul, sense of imagination, and community. It successfully helped me to understand and construct new meanings and possibilities for thinking, talking, and writing together. It deepened my trust in myself, the depth and creativity of the students, and humility for what work we could do together, if we began with ourselves, shared our stories, and made them a touchstone of the curriculum. It was messy, painfully slow, and very funny at times, but over the semester that we met together, despite all the very real difficulties, glimpses of a vision of what collaboration in a democratic community might be emerged. The vision is one of building trust and love in the classroom.

Love in the classroom prepares students and teachers to open our minds and hearts. It is the foundation on which every learning community can be created. Teachers need not fear that practicing love in the classroom will lead to favoritism. Love will always move us away from domination in all its forms. Love will always challenge and change us. This is the heart of the matter (hooks, 2003, p. 137).

"Justice is nothing but love with legs. Justice is what love looks like when it takes social form" (Jones, 2009). It is the public desire and will for justice that shapes an authentic democratic society. If this is so, we need to build trust and make public spaces for our personal stories. Public policy needs to revision and reprioritize to adapt our emergent themes as curricular priorities in the classroom: Teacher-Student Relationships; Home, School, and Community Connections; Socio-Cultural Diversity; Critical Pedagogy and Curriculum; and Resiliency. These personal stories and their connections to larger themes helped us to imagine trust, love, and justice; more democratic schools and classrooms; and courageous, self-conscious choices for continuing the audacity to hope.

President Obama's Race to the Top policy is not the promised change in direction and vision from *No Child Left Behind* that he spoke of during the campaign. It is not what critical educators and citizens had the audacity to hope would become reality.

Decisive measures and bold reforms are needed to address the many serious challenges confronting the nation's schools and to recover from eight years of misguided policies. As state governments enact severe cuts to education budgets and lay off teachers on a

scale not seen in more than 30 years, it will be equally important for the federal government to restore our commitment to public education. …However, change in education cannot be implemented on a piecemeal basis. The administration needs a new vision, one rooted in the recognition that schools must provide equal opportunity for all children to learn if the schools are to fulfill their vital role as the cornerstone of our democracy. For this to happen, the administration must understand what was wrong with NCLB and the policies pursued by the Bush administration, and it must direct funds where change and innovation are most needed.

Were the administration to embrace a broader and bolder vision of reform and devise policies to back it up, it would encourage students and teachers to utilize their talent, creativity, and imagination rather than allowing the school curriculum to be reduced to preparing students to perform on standardized tests. And it would recognize that schools have an essential role to play in renewing and invigorating American democracy by encouraging critical thinking and civic engagement. The administration must not be afraid to remind the public that this is, in fact, the historic purpose for which public schools were created. (Noguera, P., downloaded June 23, 2010). We close the article with the unforgettable final expression assignment created by former student Linda Barta. She forcefully and emotionally wove together many of the course resources and experiences with the vast reservoir of her democratic self as teacher and learner across time in this performance the last night of class. She shared these words in the form of a dramatic reprise of herself as a child in the Bronx watching Saturday morning TV with her siblings. Linda is a tall, eloquent African American woman with an imposing intelligence and a professional singing and speaking voice. Imagine you can hear the range of emotional resonance in her child-self voice and see the authentic dramatic quality of her performance. This type of assignment allows students to share their experiences in their own creative way.

We the People???

by Linda Barta

It's a Saturday morning about 9:57.
The year is 1976 or 77. I don't quite remember.

What I do remember is that my brother and sisters are at my side.
The smell of bacon, and Pledge
With a faint hint of Mr. Clean are wafting through our apartment.
And we are sitting on the floor in front of the television, waiting.
Here it comes. *Schoolhouse Rock* is on. They shout,
"…Cuz Knowledge is Power!!"

I squeeze my eyes shut and cross my fingers.
"Please don't let it be 'Conjunction Junction: What's Your Function'
Because that's Terry's (my stupid brother's) favorite."

Then I hear it. "YES!!!" It's the Preamble!!!"

"We the people
In order to form a more perfect union

Establish justice, Ensure domestic tranquility
Provide for the common defense
Promote the general welfare and
Secure the blessings of liberty
For ourselves and our posterity
Do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

Then I grow up.
I begin to take it in
As Saturday after Saturday after Saturday
I hear "We the People. We the People. We the People."
We?? The people???
Now I'm askin' in Ebonics, 'cuz I can,
Who *be* the people?

As I look around it doesn't appear that many of you the people could be —
And Jefferson, Thomas, he owned people like me.
So "we" probably wasn't you, and it certainly wasn't me.

Well then, what do we do with this — Democracy?
This thing we've been messing up since 10,000 B.C.
No, it's not perfect —
But it's a whole lot better than nothing — better than nothing.
It gives us something to work on and to work with.
And work is what we've always had to do.

It seems that **we** — the people
Have always had to fight — for the right — to be — the people.

Slavery?
The Indian Removal Act of 1830? *Yes, Andrew Jackson was a hater!*
Internment Camps?
Jim Crow and Poll taxes
Separate wasn't equal and isn't equal.
Less wasn't equal and isn't equal.
Keeping folks ignorant?
Hiding the curriculum?
We couldn't give into that. We can't give into that!

But as my grandma used to sing…"*I don't feel noways tired…"*

Because those on whose shoulders we stand
Whose experiences we've learned from
Have helped us to understand —

That democracy, social justice, and equity
Are in reality tied to this one thing —

Ed-u-ca-tion! A four-syllable word (I learned that in school).
Brown vs. who? Mendez vs. who?
Separating Asians and Native Americans.
Separating Native Americans!!!??? — They're the people!!!!!!!!!!

But it was because those in power knew
That if we
Black, Brown, Yellow, Red,
Women, poor, disabled, disenfranchised, othered…
Ever got this thing right. Education, I mean,
Then we who are not empowered…
We, the people, would TRULY become
We the people.

But it is this very thing called democracy
Lofty in its goals,
Magnificent in its ideal,
Assigning intrinsic equality and moving us toward universal suffrage,
Personal freedom, self-determination, and political equality —
But — flawed in its deeper reality, and often perverted in its execution

It is this thing called democracy
That makes it possible for we — who were not included in the people —
To be — the people.

And it is for that reason that I will continue to do what I do — Teach.
No, really teach — democratically
Not that cookie cutter stuff.
No mindless, repetitive activities that causes one to ask
"Why go to school?" (Wolk)
And "No," my dear John Dewey, not training. Never training!
But learning and teaching socially
Experience built on experience.
Reconstructing — constantly.

And as for me —
I get to be — the Moral Authority
Making sure that it all goes right —
As together we learn to think — — — critically.

And if I'm teaching the people, the people we be
Then I must reflect on my own pedagogy — of freedom

Promoting autonomy, ethics, as well as liberty.
Helping my charges understand
That it is we who are the subjects of our own learning. (Freire)
Yes, we.
For I am still a student even as I teach.
I'm still learning to be the best I can be.

So *School House Rock*
You have my eternal and undying gratitude —
Including you **Rufus Xavier Sarsaparilla!**

What you have so loudly proclaimed is true
And you have been saying it to
Children and children and children for years and years
With enthusiasm, vigor, and conviction — — —
Every single Saturday morning
On my — all — time — favorite — kids — show —
Continue to shout it (in repeats) to
East L.A., the South side of Chicago, Fresno, the South Bronx (where I'm from)
And any place where there are those who don't know
That we — be — the we — in
"We the People!"
Continue to shout it…

"Knowledge is Power!"

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